

Hiking the Guatemalan **Highlands**



Melissa Denchak is on a three-day hike to the picturesque Lake Atitlán in Guatemala, past volcanoes and through Maya villages in the country's rocky highlands. But why is the sun-scorched high point of the trek called Alaska?



“Can you scrub my back?” Patricia held out a baby blue exfoliating glove. We had met just the night before and were sitting in bikinis, shoulder-to-shoulder, in a brick *temezcal* – a traditional Maya sauna shaped like a large, domed kennel. In front of us, red-hot coals glowed beneath a pile of smooth stones that Shon, my fiancé, sprinkled with cold water. The droplets hit with a sizzle and turned to steam, filling the hot space with thick air. In minutes, I was sweating off the dirt and dust from the day’s trek through Guatemala’s remote and rocky highland region. It was the next best thing to a shower – except that I was scrubbing a stranger’s back.

Our adventure had started the day before, when Shon and I travelled with our friends Astrid and Alejandro from Panajachel, the small Guatemalan town where we live, to Quetzaltenango (or Xela), the country’s second-largest city and home of the non-profit hiking organisation Quetzaltrekkers.

‘Social change... one step at a time’ is Quetzaltrekkers’ slogan and what it’s been working towards since 1995, when it was founded by a group of Guatemalan and foreign social workers looking to raise money for Escuela de la Calle (EDELAC), an organisation that operates a primary school and dormitory for street kids in Xela. All of the money that Quetzaltrekkers earns from its trips goes directly to EDELAC. When you hike with Quetzaltrekkers, you’re hiking to help.

The outfit is staffed by volunteers (guides from around the globe who commit to a minimum three-month stint) and offers treks through some of Guatemala’s most fascinating regions. Its three-day, 45km amble through the country’s highlands is its most popular, and for good reason. It begins in Xela (a totally likable city with stately monuments and scenic cobblestone streets), ends at Lake Atitlán (one of Central America’s signature sights) and cuts straight through the heart of the Guatemalan highlands, a remote area of dramatic valleys, adobe villages and sheep-studded plateaus that few outsiders ever get to see.

It was the hike that Shon, Astrid, Alejandro and I would be doing, but only after a mandatory orientation at Quetzaltrekkers’ office. We left our

bags at a nearby hotel and headed to the meeting.

I was nervous. Although I had a handful of challenging hikes under my belt, I had never donned a backpack and trekked for three solid days. Nor had Astrid or Alejandro, but I could already see they had one-upped me in the technical clothing department. And while I was fairly certain Shon liked me, I also knew he was hard-wired to go fast. There would be no relying on him to ensure I wasn’t left behind, lost in a corn field or trampled by a donkey. Of our guides and group members, I wasn’t sure what to expect either. I pictured hardcore men and women with beards who used Swiss army knives in lieu of forks.

My worries were put to rest not long after arrival. It was prime holiday time – between Christmas and New Year – so plenty of people had signed up for the trek, and it was decided that we would split into two groups. Group A would go fast. Group B would not. My crew opted for Group B, and so did nearly everyone else. It was only with much cajoling that both groups evened out to about 15 people each. Clearly I wasn’t the only one who was nervous.

I also wasn’t the only one who needed gear. Quetzaltrekkers realises that travellers to Guatemala may not have the requisite items for a multi-day trek and has an abundantly stocked equipment room from which you can borrow all sorts of things for free. I grabbed water shoes while other hikers signed out headlamps, hiking boots, sleeping bags, sleeping mats and backpacks.

We then divvied up the food to be carried and introduced ourselves. We were a multinational mix, with England, Belgium, Germany, the States and the Czech Republic represented. Our guides gave us a rundown of the hike to come and the rules to follow (ask before taking photos of locals and please no shitting in the shit kit – a bag containing a trowel and loo roll – it’s happened) and then set us free, with directions to return the next day at 6.30am. Shon, Astrid, Alejandro and I went straight for the bar to carb-load on pizza and beer.

The next morning we arrived at Quetzaltrekkers’ office bundled in scarves, woolly hats and jackets: December at 2,330m. We piled around a long table for whole-wheat pancakes, ►



☺ We spotted the Pan-American Highway in the distance, stopped in a cinderblock town for ice cream and routinely hugged the trail’s edge to let cows and woodcutters with loads of kindling squeeze by ☺

Distant goal: Lake Atitlán's volcanoes –
and they look very far away...



Who's writing



Melissa Denchak moved from Manhattan to Guatemala's Lake Atitlán area in 2012 with her fiancé, Shon. She is a freelance writer and editor and works for an Antigua-based travel company, though large chunks of her time are spent eating tortillas and fried plantains too. Melissa has explored much of Guatemala (her favourite places include the Tikal ruins, Monterrico beach town and Quetzaltenango area) and summited a handful of its volcanoes, despite her fear of falling in. She blogs about living in Central America at www.notquiteroughingit.com.

pineapple-banana salad, hot chocolate and coffee, before setting out on Xela's quiet streets. Near the gritty outskirts of the city, we hoisted our bags on top of a 'chicken bus' (a retrofitted North American school bus) and travelled to the tiny town of Xecam. Here, in front of a small, white church, we swapped our scarves, hats and jackets for copious amounts of sunblock, the start of a morning ritual.

From Xecam we began our ascent out of the Xela valley – the toughest stretch of our three-day hike right out of the gate. A dusty ochre road took us past white adobe homes with barking dogs, hens with spotted chicks and mules with bundles of wood. The road then petered out to a rocky trail up through

a forest. Conversation waned, replaced by laboured breathing, but still there was plenty of distraction. Through holes in the forest canopy, we had a bird's-eye view of Xela, the Sierra Madre mountain range and Santa María volcano, which last erupted in 1902. That explosion was the third-largest of the 20th century and killed thousands of people. Birds too, which later resulted in another tragedy, a malarial outbreak. The Santa María we saw, though, was silent.

A few hours after setting out, our sweaty, single-file group spilled from the forest on to a sweeping plain of tall, spindly grasses, carefully tilled plots of land and sun-scorched corn fields – a dry season medley of gold, taupe

and mocha brown. Called Alaska, this wind-swept area would be the highest point of our hike at 3,050m.

"This is harder than I thought it'd be," said Astrid, as she dropped her bag and sprawled out in the grass. My sentiments exactly. The hike had interrupted my holiday cookie binge, and I wasn't feeling in tip-top form. Plus, while I had always known I'd be carrying a bag, I hadn't given much thought to toting a wardrobe, meals and multiple litres of water every step of the way. It could have been worse, though. I could have been Alejandro. After pizza and beer the night before, we had all thought it a grand idea to buy a tall bottle of *ponche de leche* (Guatemala's take on eggnog), which

LAKE ATITLÁN – WHAT TO DO

Lake Atitlán is one of Guatemala's must-see sights and the convenient endpoint of this hike. Here's what to do when you get there...

1 Explore Santiago Atitlán. In this Tz'utujil town, traditionally dressed locals pay tribute to Maximón, a cigar-smoking, liquor-swilling Maya folk saint who is housed by a different member of the local religious brotherhood each year. Maya shamans (spiritual leaders) often perform ceremonies wherever Maximón resides. Check out Santiago's busy market (open on Fridays and Sundays) and 16th-century church.

2 Climb San Pedro volcano. One of the lake's three volcanoes, San Pedro (3,020m) can be summited in a day. The moderately challenging hike passes through coffee and corn fields and a cloud forest. The top offers a bird's-eye view of Atitlán and the highland plateau that borders it.

3 Shop in San Juan La Laguna. This small community is home to a handful of women's cooperatives that use all-natural dyes, like beets and carrots, and traditional weaving methods to make some of Guatemala's prettiest textiles. Stock up on scarves, tablecloths, blankets and even iPad covers.

4 Zip-line over Atitlán. The Reserva Natural Atitlán, just outside the lakeside town of Panajachel, has jungle-lined nature trails, swing bridges, a butterfly preserve and a series of zip-line routes that carry thrill-seekers through a lush canopy and over the lake – the volcano views are great.



Cool crossing: the route crosses this river nine times in one day



Pretty countryside: leaving the Maya town of Santa Catarina Ixtahuacán

Caption

☞ Through holes in the forest canopy, we had a bird's-eye view of Xela, the Sierra Madre mountain range and Santa María volcano, which last erupted in 1902 ☹

OTHER TREKS TO TRY

Want to see more of Guatemala on foot? Consider these three adventures...

1 Acatenango volcano

Just outside the colonial city of Antigua, Acatenango is Guatemala's third tallest volcano at 3,975m. The challenging hike to the top cuts through farms, cloud forests and rocky volcanic terrain before it levels out on to a sandy crater with incredible views, particularly of Fuego volcano, which spews smoke and ash regularly. Acatenango can be done in a single day, though a two-day hike includes a beautiful sunset and sunrise, too.

2 El Mirador ruins

Hidden in the isolated northern department of El Petén, El Mirador archaeological site is largely unexplored. Three times larger than Guatemala's famous Tikal ruins and surrounded by dense jungle, it's accessed only by air or a steamy, five-day, round-trip trek – there are no roads. The wild terrain is mostly flat but can get very muddy. Keep an eye out for howler monkeys, agoutis (a bit like guinea pigs) and the elusive jaguar.

3 Tajumulco volcano

At 4,222m, Tajumulco volcano is the highest point, volcanic or otherwise, in all of Central America. It's in western Guatemala, about 50km northwest of Xela. On the way up, you'll hike along grassy plateaus and through high alpine forests. At the rough and rocky crater rim, the air is thin and cold, but the views are phenomenal. Tajumulco can be done as a one- or two-day trek.

Alejandro was valiantly lugging.

After the requisite 'It's all downhill from here!' jokes, we left our Alaska perch and followed farmers' fields to a dirt road along which we passed tiny communities of tin-roofed, cinderblock homes and pick-up trucks packed with locals in traditional dress. There were goat-spotted hills, bamboo fences covered in sun-dried clothing and kids who shyly giggled "*¡buenos días!*" And then it all gave way to a giant ravine, the bottom of which we could not see. Our road turned into a trail that led to an overlook bursting with wildflowers. From here, we spotted our goal – the distant, hazy-blue outline of Lake Atitlán's volcanoes.

They looked really far away.

From the overlook, our path took a nosedive and became slippery with dust and loose rocks (the result of rainless months) before it just as suddenly levelled out into a cool forest full of tall stands of tufted bamboo. During the wet season this would be a moss-filled cloud forest, but we were passing through at its driest.

We stopped for a lunch of hummus-and-veggie sandwiches, bean salad and crisps and then descended to another dirt road that brought us, along with dusk's approach, to the K'iche'-speaking Maya town of Santa Catarina Ixtahuacán (2,300m), where we would spend the night.

In 1998, Hurricane Mitch tore through much of Guatemala, devastating ►

LET'S GO

Want to do what Melissa did? Here's how you can...

Get there

There are no direct flights from the UK to Guatemala, but you can do it with just one change, in Madrid, by flying with Iberia or BA. Prices start from about £550 return and journey time is around 16 hours.

This hike begins in Xela, 200km west of Guatemala City. The safest and easiest way to get to Xela is with a private shuttle company. Adrenalina Tours (www.adrenalinatours.com) offers transfers for 270 quetzales (£22); the trip is 5½ hours.

Stay there

The night before our hike we stayed at Hotel Villa Real Plaza (+502-7761-4045; rooms from £21), just a short walk from Quetzaltrekkers' office. A no-frills spot with hot water and comfortable beds, it boasts a stellar location just steps from Xela's central plaza, cafes and restaurants. Post-hike, there are a handful of options. In San Pedro, consider Hotel Sak'cari El Amanecer (www.hotel-sakcari.com; rooms from £21) or Hotel Mikaso (www.mikasohotel.com; rooms from £11). You can also cross the lake for other popular towns such as Santiago Atitlán, San Marcos, Santa Cruz, and Panajachel.

When to go

You can do the hike any time of year. During Guatemala's dry season, November to April, skies are blue, the sun is strong and rain is rare. Nights can be chilly, particularly in the highlands, but daytime temperatures are almost always warm to hot. Trails can be slippery with dust and loose rocks, and the landscape tends to be parched but picturesque. The rainy season is May to October. Showers typically start at around four in the afternoon and can last from a few minutes to all night, though some days it doesn't rain at all. Temperatures are slightly warmer during the wet season, and the landscape is lush and verdant.

What to take

You'll need trekking essentials like a backpack, sleeping bag, sleeping mat, headlamp and good boots. During the dry season, prepare for chilly temperatures and plenty



of sun with comfortable layers, sunblock and a hat. During the wet season, bring waterproof gear and quick-drying clothing. Quetzaltrekkers has an equipment room where you can borrow most items. Don't forget a bathing suit and towel for the *temezcal*. Sleeping spaces are shared; bring



ear plugs. Take a book, as you may have a few evening hours to kill. Insect repellent isn't a bad idea. Guides supply toilet paper and carry a well-stocked medical kit.

If you have new or used gear that you'd like to get rid of, Quetzaltrekkers accepts donations. It also collects school supplies like pens and notebooks; these can be bought in Xela.

Cost and tour operators

We travelled with Quetzaltrekkers. The company raises money for Escuela de la Calle (EDELAC), an organisation that operates a primary school and dormitory for street kids in Xela. All of the money that Quetzaltrekkers earns from its trips goes directly to EDELAC and its guides are volunteers from around the world. See www.quezaltrekkers.com. This hike costs just 650 quetzales (£52) per person, plus 100 quetzales (£8) if you have luggage transferred to the hike's endpoint.

UK-based operators offering trips to Guatemala include KE Adventure Travel (www.keadventure.com), which runs a 15-day trekking trip, climbing seven volcanoes including Tajumulco, Central America's highest peak. Exodus too offers a 16-day trekking trip: see www.exodus.co.uk.

Safety

Guatemala is a developing country and has its security issues. That said, more than a million travellers visit Guatemala each year, and few ever have a problem. Stay safe in Guatemala as you would anywhere else in the world. Don't flaunt expensive-looking items or full wallets, and don't venture into dark and empty areas of towns or cities. Vigilance and common sense are the best ways to ensure a safe and happy trip.

the highland region and destroying more than half of Santa Catarina with landslides. The majority of its surviving residents left to form a new community on higher ground. Some families stayed behind though, and today Santa Catarina is a quiet community that survives on agriculture, like beans and corns and – apparently – quick trips to the *temezcal*.

For centuries, the Maya people have used *temezcals* to cleanse, heal and purify, and a local family made theirs available to us. Crawling in, I felt stiff, dusty and chilled by the evening air. Twenty minutes later, Patricia's back was clean and I was toasty, refreshed and ready for dinner. We had arranged sleeping bags and mats on the tiled floor of Santa Catarina's empty municipal building, and here enjoyed a pasta dinner. Dessert was the *ponche de leche* (much to Alejandro's relief) and the comfort of a sleeping bag. We had completed our first 20km.

The next morning, I awoke to the sombre tolling of church bells. It was a clear, chilly morning with beautiful blue skies. We piled out of the muni and headed to a tiny *tienda* (shop) for eggs, rice, beans and freshly made, piping-hot corn tortillas – a big breakfast to fuel us for the challenge to come.

Say goodbye to Santa Catarina and you run smack into the Nahualá valley, an exaggerated system of rocky cliffs, swooping forests and a seriously steep climb Quetzaltrekkers has dubbed Record Hill. This daunting mini-mountain can be summited in nine minutes (that's the time to beat), though it took me closer to 15. OK, 20. It was a slog worth making though, as panoramic views and the spicy smell of a cool pine forest met us up top.

Our foe of the day defeated, we coursed up and down through flaxen fields of corn, plots of land green with beans and quiet forests. We spotted the Pan-American Highway in the distance, stopped in a cinderblock town for ice cream and routinely hugged the trail's edge to let cows and woodcutters with loads of kindling squeeze by.

After lunch, we arrived at the narrow Payatza River and changed into water shoes. Bordered by thick undergrowth and a lofty canopy, the ankle-deep water was refreshingly cool. We crossed the sand- and mud-bottomed river and its tributaries nine ►

All aboard: loading up the 'chicken bus'



times, before summiting a steep hill and following a paved road to the town of Xiprian and the house of Don Pedro. Here, cold strawberry and pineapple smoothies greeted us, as did a pile of kids and Don Pedro himself.

For nearly 10 years, Don Pedro has been hosting Quetzaltrекkers hikers in a simple house with a large wood-fire stove and an enclosed dining room that doubles as a sleeping space. "We love making friends with people from around the world," Don Pedro told me when I asked him about his family's relationship with Quetzaltrекkers. "It's been a pleasure to share our life with an organisation that helps." And share his family does. For dinner, we feasted on smoky grilled chicken, piles of pasta, rice and beans, cucumber salad and corn tortillas. With mugs of steaming tea, we toasted another 20km completed and then bedded down for the night. We had only 5km to go.

The next morning we rose at 3.30am and set out on a silent road beneath a nearly full moon. We passed dark homes and dozing horses before turning on to a forested footpath that led to an opening and a sweeping view of a starlit Lake Atitlán.

Formed by a volcanic eruption more than 80,000 years ago, Atitlán is bordered by rocky cliffs, pine-clad

hills, Maya towns and three towering volcanoes: Tolimán, Atitlán and San Pedro. If it sounds incredible, it's because it is. *Brave New World* author Aldous Huxley described it as 'too much of a good thing,' comparing it to Italy's Lake Como.

Even in the dark it was impressive, surrounded by shadowy mountains and twinkling town lights. We settled into sleeping bags to watch as dawn splashed dramatic reds, yellows and pinks across a navy-blue, cloud-streaked sky. Morning dew settled on the grass around us as little by little

☪ We swapped our scarves, hats, and jackets for copious amounts of sunblock, the start of a morning ritual ☺

Atitlán awoke. Early morning boats sliced through the lake's waters, distant roosters began to crow and smoke snaked up from sleepy homes beneath us.

After a breakfast of hot oatmeal mixed with peanut butter and jam, we followed a narrow, rocky trail along Indian Nose ridge, the lake never leaving our sight. We cut through steep coffee fields where our trampling feet kicked up big dust clouds, greeted machete- and tool-toting farmers, and spotted fishermen in wooden kayaks as Atitlán's waters drew nearer.

And then we were finished – or nearly finished, at least. Our dirt trail levelled off and deposited us on a paved road in the tiny community of San Juan La Laguna. Here we piled into the back of a pick-up truck for a quick drive to San Pedro, our final destination.

It was New Year's Eve, and the touristy town was preparing to party when we arrived. Shon, Astrid, Alejandro and I flopped into lounge chairs at a lakeside restaurant with the rest of our group and ordered celebratory beers. I was spent and sore but satisfied. Our 45km trek had been a success, we had seen some of Guatemala's most beautiful terrain, and I still had holiday cookies waiting for me at home. I couldn't think of a better way to close the year. **AT**

